

# GLOBAL ASIA: TURNING POINTS IN MODERN ASIAN HISTORY

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## Turning Points in Southeast Asia, 1900 to 2016

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At the turn of the 20th century, the nations of Southeast Asia existed only as the hopes of different nationalist groups. The 11 countries of what are now considered Southeast Asia — Brunei, Cambodia, Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor L'ese, and Viet Nam— previously existed as portions of old kingdoms and empires. In a little over 100 years, these countries shook off colonialism and moved into varying forms of governance and different forms of economic development.

How did so much change occur in such a short time? Five key turning points in Southeast Asia brought about dramatic changes, allowing former European and American

colonies to evolve into independent nations that are now a vital part of an international economy.

**A rise in nationalist movements in the early 1900s** affected many modern Southeast Asian nations. Among the contributing factors were increased educational opportunities for local elites, many of whom studied in Europe. Colonial authorities relied on educated elites to help run their empires. In addition, indigenous-language newspapers proliferated with the rise of the print media, spreading nationalistic ideas and sentiments. Vietnamese priests disseminated anticolonial arguments in the guise of religious services and publications. Malay sultans and feudal leaders engaged in a stultified form of nationalism with the British, while leftist Malay groups pursued full independence; Chinese Malay cadres retreated into the forests and engaged in battles with the British. In addition to the difficulties of forming nations out of old colonial empires and throwing off their colonizers, many Southeast Asian nations struggled to unite widely diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Modern Burma/Myanmar recognizes 135 distinct ethnicities, while Indonesia consists of at least 300 ethnic groups spread across thousands of island.

**The outbreak of World War II in 1941–1942 coincided with Japan's expansionist program that began in 1937,** spreading from China and Korea into Southeast Asia.

Japanese treatment of Southeast Asian populations varied, from actual alliance (Thailand) to extreme military violence (Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Burma and others). The rapid Japanese ascendancy and the European colonizers' inability to resist it gutted ideas of white supremacy: Here were Asians defeating westerners. This revelation fed the fires of nationalism among Southeast Asians. After the war, weakened imperial powers (the Netherlands, Britain, France) attempted to reestablish authority in their former Southeast Asian colonies; eventually, they all failed.

**The Asian Economic Crisis of 1997** brutally impacted many Southeast Asian nations. After the end of foreign rule, Southeast Asian nations tried on, discarded and established different forms of governance. Today these nations practice communism, democracy, federalism, parliamentary republicanism, weak monarchy, authoritarian rule and military rule. The struggle for independence has continued with separatist groups operating in many Southeast Asian nations. Different governmental forms aside, by the late 20th century, many of these nations

had achieved surprising economic success. The 1997 Asian economic crisis, however, severely impacted many Southeast Asian nations. The Thai baht collapsed as the country descended into bankruptcy, creating a financial crisis that quickly spread through much of Southeast Asia. Indonesia also suffered a deep financial crisis that eventually led to rioting, unrest and, ultimately, the downfall of the autocratic President Suharto. Singapore's economy also faltered, leading Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to allow the creation of high-end casinos, a step he had vowed Singapore would never take. Laos, whose economy was already unstable, suffered, as did that of the Philippines.

**The effects of climate change since the 1970s** are increasingly challenging Southeast Asian nations, a threat that knows no borders. As climate change warms the waters of the deeply cold Arctic Ocean, the effects are felt far away, threatening coastal cities and agricultural economies worldwide. Warmer oceans affect changes in wind systems which in turn alter weather systems, resulting in superstorms and droughts, punishing monsoons and flooding. Nations such as Burma/Myanmar and Laos may suffer severe crop losses due to extended droughts alternating with compressed rainy seasons. Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia worry about flooding from sea-level rise and increased rains or deadly typhoons.

**The use of social media exploded after the turn of the 21st century** in Southeast Asia. Flooding in Indonesia partly led to the election of populist President Joko Widodo (elected 2014), and his election was largely credited to social media use. Thanks to the proliferation of inexpensive cell phones and cell service, social media reaches deeply into cities and rural areas alike. Although internet information is highly regulated in parts of Southeast Asia, many Southeast Asians do have cell phones and access to social media. During Typhoon Haiyan, for example, Filipinos in the disaster areas were able to connect with loved ones and aid groups via cell phone. Social media use and access have fed campaigns to stop executions in Singapore and to protest government actions as Thailand struggles with successive coups.

These five critical factors brought about extreme changes in Southeast Asia, allowing former European and American colonies to transform into independent nations that are a vital part of an international economy.

